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SUBJECT: HANGZHOU HOUSE CHURCH CHRISTIANS

REF: 2006 BEIJING 24614

CLASSIFIED BY: Mary Tarnowka, Chief, Political/Economic Section  
, U.S. Consulate Shanghai.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Poloff met with Hangzhou-based human rights activist Zan Aizong and house church member Lin Tongqiang on January 8 to discuss the situation of house churches in Hangzhou. Zan confirmed reports that eight house church Christians were convicted for inciting protests against the government on December 22, 2006. Zan could not provide many details of the case during his conversation with Poloff as three men who appeared to be plain-clothes Public Security Bureau officers sat near Zan and Poloff and listened in on the entire conversation. However, according to a December 23 Reuters article which sites Zan as a source, a local court in the Xiaoshan district of Hangzhou ruled that eight members of a house church in Xiaoshan had illegally built a church in Xiaoshan in July 2006 and tried to stop authorities from demolishing the church by inciting a protest. A December 22 AsiaNews (a Christian website) article said two of the defendants, unofficial pastors Shen Zhuke and Wang Weliang, were sentenced to three and a half years imprisonment. Two other members of the group, Feng Guangliang and Luo Bingliang, were sentenced to two years. The remaining four had their prison sentences suspended.

¶2. (C) Zan added that the eight people that were convicted were not leaders of the house church that was demolished, but were targeted by the local authorities as a warning to house church congregants. Lin and Zan said that in the eyes of the local authorities, the Xiaoshan church had gone too far. House churches were allowed to operate, but only within limits. If congregations got too big and became too independent, local governments would crack down on these churches. According to Zan and Lin, this was what occurred in Xiaoshan. The Xiaoshan congregation numbered in the thousands and its leaders had organized protests to challenge local authorities when the church was demolished. While local authorities could not convict all eight people because of international pressure, it needed to convict some of the people to keep local underground churches in line.

¶3. (C) Lin and Zan believed that the religious situation in Zhejiang province was improving. Zan said there were many cases in which house church congregations defied the local authorities

by organizing protests or building churches without permission. The increase in the number of these incidents was an indication that house churches were becoming more powerful and independent.

Lin said the number of Protestants in the region was steadily increasing and one out of every twenty people in Hangzhou was a Protestant. Only 25 percent of Protestants in Hangzhou worshiped in state-sanctioned churches. He said that the growth of Protestants was not limited to a particular group and there was an increase in both rural and urban areas. He noted, however, that churches had more space to maneuver in urban areas. He added that the central government was becoming more interested in religious issues and had spent a lot of money researching these issues. However, the lack of true believers in the government made it difficult for the government to understand Christianity. He believed that there would continue to be conflicts as long as religious issues were managed by non-Christians.

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